Ann Zhao

Press

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New Currents



Installation view of **ANN ZHAO**'s *Untitled*, 2011, acrylic on canvas board, 41 × 61 × 3.5 cm (left); and *Curse*, 2026, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 200 × 4 cm (right); at "Spillover," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery.

ANN ZHAO

For her solo exhibition "Spillover" (2026) at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery, Ann Zhao assembled a 20-something-page chapbook of sparks of inspiration and life dumps. A photo of her laptop on the couch, a screenshot of filmmaking notes, a snapshot of a few lines from a book—the content reads as if lifted from the artist's social media or sketchpad, encapsulating the spontaneity that anchors her practice. That diaristic quality structures *Ben Ming Nian* (2026), 24 photographs from the year Zhao spent in Shanghai. The images fall just short of being autobiographical: opaque in their details and too fragmentary to cohere into narrative. She seems to leave the work unresolved, suspended on the threshold of completion.

Elsewhere in the show, she stages a confrontation between *Untitled* (2011), a childhood painting of a park in autumnal hues, and *Curse* (2026), a larger, monochrome reworking of the same scene. The space between them measures psychological as well as temporal distance, rendering development as circular rather than progressive.

In a market that expects emerging practitioners to develop a recognizable style and legible self, Zhao is moving in the opposite direction. The 24-year-old's practice shifts between subject, form, and theme, remaining deliberately unsettled. The text-painting *men & art* (2024) states its refusal outright—"I won't create a masterpiece"—in white letters against green, spaced with visible unease. What she rejects is not artmaking itself, but the consolidation of meaning that usually accompanies it.

The "Spillover" chapbook closes with a conversation between Zhao and Japanese-born, New York-based artist Taro Masushio, who asks about the relationship between two of Zhao's paintings, *Little Girl Blues* and *Niña* (both 2023). The former is a portrait of American singer Nina Simone, her gaze subtly melancholic, half the canvas left blank. The latter, its title also meaning "little girl," simply spells out four letters in pink, its strokes dry and uneven, reducing portraiture to a bare name. Zhao explains that the harder she tried to capture Simone, the more elusive her image became. The failure of representation becomes a record of its inherent impossibility. "All the information dissolved her," Zhao says.

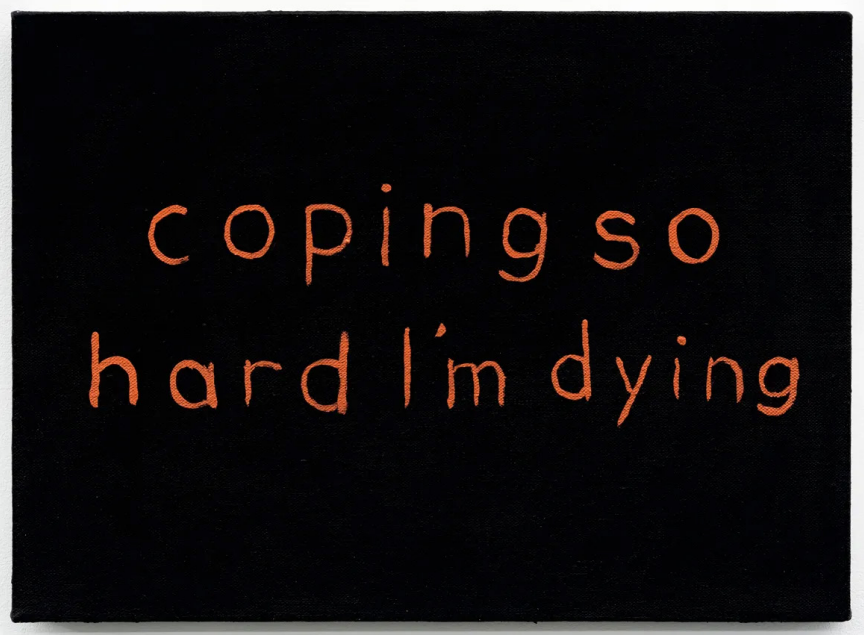
YUQIAN FAN

ARTFORUM

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Ann Zhao | Theta

Jenny Wu



Ann Zhao, *Untitled*, 2024, acrylic on linen, 11 × 15".

The largest work in "Idiot Wind," Ann Zhao's debut solo exhibition at Theta, was *men & art* (all works cited, 2024), an oil painting. It contained a line of white text scrawled onto a flat-green surface, emphatically declaring—like a blackboard message written out by a student being punished, à la Bart Simpson—I WON'T CREATE A MASTERPIECE. In Untitled, another of the nine canvases featured here, coral letters on a dark background spelled out a terse confession, a potential reason behind the artist's refusal to produce a more conventional type of painting: COPING SO HARD I'M DYING. In *Dou Wei*, which called to mind a page from a graphic novel, an oblong speech bubble on a black-gesso ground contained a quote—appropriated from the titular Chinese rock star—about living a sensible and upright life. For the show's centerpiece, a thirteen-minute video titled summer camp, Zhao focuses on her doting father, Scott, who performed *gua sha* (a traditional Chinese therapy that involves skin scraping with a smooth-edged tool) and wet cupping on the artist while talking about physical and spiritual well-being.

Via Scott's monologue, delivered in Mandarin and subtitled in English—alongside closely cropped shots of Zhao's abdomen and limbs—viewers were able to piece together a loose portrait of the artist. Her rib cage, according to Scott, held her "habit of hesitation," her doubt and indecision; meanwhile, her liver was the seat of her "depression." Zhao's unspecified malady, which her father was attempting to holistically "cure," seemed related to burnout—specifically, the kind of exhaustion one suffers at the nexus of creative labor and capitalism. "I can't unwind," she confessed as her father released bad *qi* from her leg. Unlike, say, Amalia Ulman's 2014 social media performance *Excellences & Perfections*, Zhao's *summer camp* did not follow a transformation arc of self-optimization. The video looped with no discernible

beginning or end. It was unclear whether the artist—or at least the persona she adopted throughout this exhibition, that of a reluctant and aloof enfant terrible—got better from her treatment or even what, exactly, “better” would mean in this context.

Yet *summer camp* was not a satiric critique of the health-and-wellness industry in the manner of, say, *Unspa*, 2008, a pop-up resort by the collective Circular File (Josh Kline and Anicka Yi) where massages came with exaggerated, sycophantic pep talks. By introducing an intergenerational familial dynamic into an otherwise transactional relationship, Zhao’s project upended the conventional hierarchies between client and body worker, documentarian and subject. As her exposed flesh was scraped and suctioned, a process so painful that, at certain points, it caused her to release a series of short, breathless sobs, Zhao seemed to abandon the active functions of an artist—capturing, interpreting, and manipulating the scene—to first assume the passive position of an aggrieved convalescent before regressing into the role of someone’s ill and maladjusted child.

At a time when aspirations to create “masterpieces” and heal oneself from the inside out often come across as affectations of a certain lifestyle, Zhao’s artless paintings and at-home spa treatment recorded on a handheld camera felt refreshingly uncontrived and unexpectedly complex. Had Zhao hired her father to treat her, or did he in fact initiate the session, attempting to heal his daughter while doling out unsolicited parental wisdom? Did he know that the footage Zhao was shooting during their time together would be reabsorbed into the stream of work that was burning her out, that his medicinal art would become the content of her visual art? The contrast between Zhao’s ostensibly cynical paintings and Scott’s enthusiasm for his rehabilitative practice—coupled with the ambiguous terms of their collaboration—produced an emotional and conceptual tension that lingered like a nagging symptom throughout the exhibition’s deceptively plainspoken displays of refusal.